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ABSTRACT

Hip hop rhetoric is a cultural language used by a majority of African Americans, and some European Americans. This type of rhetoric has the ability to change meaning, to eliminate negative messages, and to code language that can only be used by the group who understands its meaning. This style should be of concern to scholars in the field of communication since they study the process of information exchange. The 1990s has made it most intriguing to culturalize music, media, clothing, cuisine, hair styles and literature, but strangely, education has missed the boat. Multiculturalism and issues concerning diversity are not given the attention they should have in educational systems. The differences in language styles need to be recognized along with standard English especially since the color of America's college classrooms is changing. When educators teach their students the fundamentals of public speaking, should they view "competence" from a traditional Eurocentric perspective or should they encourage their students to use those strategies that best articulate their own experience? If hip hop is a form of language used by youth to identify themselves, then the next logical step for communication scholars is to identify the reasons why coded language exists in the first place. Hip hop can and will bridge standard English and the Black vernacular together as a logical step towards multicultural understanding. Contains 29 references. (TB)

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LIVIN' PHAT ON THE "COOL TIP":

HIP HOP RHETORIC - THE LANGUAGE OF THE MUTED GROUP

November 19, 1994

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> African Americans have always been considered second-class citizens in a class-conscious society....As Blacks began to redefine themselves as "beautiful people" with a proud, noble heritage, the attention of the dominant culture turned to the question of intelligence. The vehicle was the fact that Blacks were failing to read and write in public schools, despite the various programs designed to help them to do so. Some theorized genetic inferiority, while others postulated that Blacks speak a degenerate form of English which prevented their learning of standard English. (Banks, 1988, p .1)

To state that language is important is to declare the obvious, yet because we can all talk we often overlook the profound influence language has on human behavior. The use of sounds and symbols enables humans to give life and character to abstract ideas. Individuals use social categories to order their social environment and reduce the complexities of the world (Gudykunst, Nishida, & Schmidt, 1989). Verbal language uses word symbols and nonverbal language uses body movement that represents individual realities or symbols through which reality exists (Sapir, 1964). Simply put, language is an essentially perfect means of

expression and communication among every known people.

Terms used by the traditionally European American culture to define African Americans have come to symbolize negative, degrading meaning. Smitherman (1986) states that "in Colonial America, whites characteristically referred to blacks as "negroes," "slaves," or "niggers." These terms were used to denigrated and keep blacks in their place. They were not used as endearing terms to identify blacks for who they were, but to remind them of their difference which was believed to be inferior to the mainstream European American society.

Presently, African American males have taken these negative terms, and other terms not associated with standard Engish, and turned them into positive terms which illustrate an endearing quality of brotherhood. The purpose of this paper will examine how words are empowered through the emphasis that popular culture places upon them.

Language and Communication

Sapir (1964) identifies language as a system of phonetic symbols for the expression of communicable thought and feeling. This fact makes understanding why while language may help reduce uncertainty it may also retard individuals in the exploration of experience. The problem arises when meanings of words from

different cultures are interpreted on a completely different understanding of what reality is for each individual group.

If language uses symbols as meaning, then what takes place when cultural differences are apparent? Words take on diverse meaning and symbolize different things to different people. This is illustrated in the differences between African American culture (the black vernacular) and the European American culture (standard English).

Language, regardless of the black vernacular or standard English, is a medium of exchange that people use to communicate with one another (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977). Language transmits culture, and it permits individuals to send and to receive messages. Language has to do with reality, and it is realistic insofar as it depicts and reflects reality or reflects the acceptance and refusal of reality on the part of the language user. One of the fundamental conditions for language to function as a means of coping with ever-changing reality is that it must itself be capable of variation and flexibility. In this sense, the variant with the highest degree of flexibility would

seem to be the most efficient.

From a co-cultural perspective for communication that might be expressed in written or spoken language communicative appropriateness makes all the difference. In communicative interactions it is usually the participants who decide what should or should not be regarded as appropriate to the situation and the communicative intentions.

Communication and language are very closely related but they are not the same phenomenon. On one hand, language does not only enable us to communicate with other people, but it also has important mental functions and affects how we understand and reflect on the world around us (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). Our experience of language in social settings leads us to categorize the world in similar ways to people around us and to manipulate these categories in our thinking (Bruner & Haste, 1987; Halliday, 1987; Vygotsky, 1962).

One other important sense in which language is a socializer beyond its literal use as a means of communication. Communication is the establishment of the rapport between the members of a physical group.

It is not what is said that matters so much as that something is said. This concept is particularly true where cultural understandings of an intimate sort are somewhat lacking among the members of a physical group, and it is felt to be important that the lack be made good by a constant supply of small talk. This caressing or reassuring quality of speech in general, even where no one has anything at the moment to communicate, reminds individuals how much more language is than a mere technique of communication.

On the other hand, verbal language is not the only means by which people communicate. Nonverbal communication is often a resort to convey simple messages amongst people who know each other. An ironic facial expression can so be powerful enough that it can completely reverse the superficial meaning of words it accompanies (Argyle, 1978); and in everyday conversation, nonverbal signals such as posture and eye-contact play an important part in regulating turn-taking between speakers (Beattie, 1983). That language is a perfect symbolism of experience, that in the actual context of behavior it cannot be divorced from action and that it is the carrier of an infinitely

nuanced expressiveness are universally valid psychological facts (Sapir, 1964).

Black Vernacular

At first glance the early origins of black vernacular seems to be a fairly straightforward topic, where historical records would be examined to reconstruct the early stages of dialect development (Gates, 1988). But several factors, including strong prejudices among scholars, have restricted the scope of these studies, to say nothing of their quality. The best historical studies of street speech have been completed during recent times as interest in the general topic of Black Studies has matured.

Understanding the question of racial equality-inferiority is essential to a full appreciation of the early investigations, because much of the historical research, as well as much of the research still, was designed to avoid recognizing that the differences in language does not connotate a negative view of black language. More recently, the debate has focused on the differences between whether black English is actually deficient, or just different from the standard English. Depending on how this question is answered, the

contemporary consequences for black English could be severe.

Educators searching for explanations for slang's explosive growth among the nation's youth find some of their answers in sociology. Sociologists believe that the young have always tried to stand apart from the old (Shuy, 1985). The interesting irony of this young generation is the fact that their parents belonged to the generation which produced the 60's revolution. The children of the 90's generation are basically left with the unlikely problem of where to rebel? Language is the last resort for a generation to make their impression.

Kochman (1981) notes that African Americans have developed an important characteristic of flair that stresses individuality. The African American style is defined as more self-conspicuous, more expressive, expansive, colorful, intense, assertive, aggressive, and more focused on the individual than any other style of a cultural group in the United States. The black vernacular has direct connection to the oral tradition.

Oral traditions and performance are long-standing traditions among African Americans (Edwards &

Seinkewicz, 1990). African American culture values verbal skills, particularly those couched in interactive and narrative frameworks.

Language and Pop Culture

Never before has language played a major role in the African American community as it has currently. Popular culture has redefined what is hot from what is not. Television shows such as **"Martin"**, **"In Living Color"**, **"Fresh Prince of Bel Air"**, **"Yo! MTV Raps"**, and **"Def Comedy Jam"** have elevated a style of language which crosses socio-economic lines reaching a population which characterizes itself as hip hop on the "cool tip." This style of language is finding its way out of the media, and into the popular press, academic circles, and in the pocket books of retailers. Hip hop rhetoric is not only a style, its an attitude which is making millions. The following is a sample of the language style used mostly by African American youth.

> Yo! the other day the MOB was maxin' at the crib, grubbin' when my boy came by to chill. Someone put on some slammin' jams and we began to blow. One by one the boog started and before I knew it folks' were trippin'

> stupid on the cool tip. Everyone was tweekin' because my nigga played you out. He was O. T. B. after I told him to wear his jim hat if he planned to be bouncin.' I guess it's all bout livin' phat and livin' large. (Johnson, 1993)

Hip hop rhetoric as a form of relating information between individuals who share an understanding of the meaning intended. The communication process, of hip hop rhetoric mentioned above, which takes place is not necessarily shared by all cultural groups and, therefore, the meanings attached to certain phrases are misinterpreted by the dominant culture. The question which arises is whether or not this type of rhetoric is valued in a society which stresses success to all groups who assimilate to standard English?

Epithets

In every language there seems to be certain unmentionables - words of such strong connotations that they cannot be used in polite discourse. The fact that some words arouse both informative and affective connotation simultaneously gives a special complexity to discussions involving racial, national, and

political groups. In English, many would illustrate the most vile and offensive word in the vocabulary as the degrading epithet "nigger." This six letter word has the ability to conjure painful memories to most individuals, especially of African Americans. Although the term has been an expressive element in the black vernacular, it has inevitably been off limits to European Americans. But as the word has found a voice in Rap music, dance and film, the role of black culture has driven it into the mainstream.

For the last several years, rap artists have increasingly used "nigga" (different from nigger) in their lyrics, repackaging it and selling it not just to their own inner-city neighborhoods, but to the largely European American suburbs. In his song "Straight Up Nigga," Ice-T raps, "I'm a nigga in America, and that much I flaunt," and indeed, a large portion of his record sales are in European America. But that does not mean that European audiences are using hip hop language.

In movies and on the television "nigga" is heard with unprecedented regularity. In **Trespass**, a film about an inner-city treasure hunt, rappers portraying

gang members call one another "nigga" almost as often as they call one another by their real names. The use of the word is simply a flat-out repetition of the street vernacular (Edwards, 1986). In rap and hip-hop music, a genre in which millions of its listeners adopt the artists' style and language, "nigga" is virtually interchangeable with words like "guy," "man," or "brother." But often it is a discussion of the word's various meanings in society which identify the black male. The black vernacular is an element of black popular culture which finds it mandatory to isolate the difference through a medium that cannot quite understand the purpose.

Young African Americans argue that their open use of the word will eventually demystify these words, stripping it of its racist meaning (Hilburn, 1990). Rappers who say they should use the word more openly maintain that its casual use, especially in the company of whites, will shift the word's context and eliminate "nigger" of its ability to hurt. Many linguists who study the black vernacular say that blacks have been doing this for years (Smitherman, 1986). By using the word strictly among themselves changes its context and

in by doing so dulls its edge whenever European Americans use it. A few literary scholars and theorists have explained the historical and cultural heritage of the black vernacular in rap as an African American form, while others have made passing reference to it as an important site of postmodernist impulses or as the prophetic voice of an angry disenfranchised group of young African Americans (Gates, 1990).

Hip Hop and Semantics

There are two totally distinct uses of language. One is the symbolic or scientific use; the other is the emotive (Milroy, 1980). The key words in the definition of the scientific use are symbol, reference, and referent. When language is used to symbolize a reference to a referent, it is symbolic or scientific (Milroy, 1980). In other words, one's use of language is that which communicates thought about things. The key words in the definition of the emotive use, on the other hand, are emotions and attitudes. When language is used to express or excite emotions and attitudes it is emotive. The use of hip hop rhetoric can be seen as symbolic language, but the purpose can also illustrate the ability of the minority culture to speak in codes

which are not readily known to the dominant culture. This phenomenon is most accurately described by muted group theory.

Muted Group Theory

Kramarae (1981) states that the Muted Group Theory provides the following explanation and expansion of the co-cultural experience: The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Since the language system established is set in stone and clearly advocates a standard English vocabulary from a Eurocentric perspective, anyone who is not a white male in this society is viewed as a co-cultural group. Almost every system in existence operates from a male centered position. Co-cultural groups, many times through their own survival, developed strategies to get around the systems which excluded them in the first place.

Muted group theory provides a way of conceptualizing and visualizing two types of structure: the underlying template structures of a group of people (the mesh of beliefs and categories that comprise their world view) and the structure of realization (the

articulation of their world view) (Kramarae, 1981).

What's Next?

Most people who know anything at all about the English language would generally admit that there are inherent problems which exist, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our society is diverse and therefore the language spoken is a direct reflection of the decadence.

Does culture shape language? Or does language shape culture? This is as difficult a question as the old puzzler of which came first, the chicken or the egg, because there is no clear separation between language and culture. In relation to the next step, the field needs to address the connection between language and culture not as a result of the monetary succes of rap and hiphop, but for the simple fact that as scholars, one cannot ignore the meteoric success of this phenomenon.

Metatheory

A metatheory suggests the character and content of theories in a sense that it prescribes what a theory should explain and what analytical methodologies are

required for revealing and establishing concepts such as symbolic engineering and expressive artifact (Asante, 1987). A metatheory, then, is the product of decision rather than discovery, and it is justified by the theories that are consonant to it.

Rhetoric, in an Afrocentric sense, is the productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony and indecision. Dialogue between persons of European and African descent must incorporate both of their respective world views. Eurocentricity and Afrocentricity signify these world views in a broad sense. Both words carry substantial contemporary ideological baggage, and such a categorization risks discounting the diversity of both traditions. Eurocentric is simply shorthand for European- rooted, as Afrocentric is shorthand for African-rooted. Afrocentricity does not infer an essentialist/exceptional stance as some black nationalists would have it. The term is in a sense similar to Cornel West's (1982) Afro-American humanist tradition. Finally, it should be noted that in popular culture, there are no pure forms of African or

European-derived speech patterns (Gates, 1988). Both cultures have been engaged in centuries of cross-fertilization. The perspective that all language should take is that of a multicultural view. This perspective would make all individuals regardless of their communication style know that their voice is valued, not just those who speak standard English.

The practice of multicultural communication theory, as Chen (1989) points out, has been more rare. Those moving towards a practice of intercultural dialogue tend to occupy the borders between social science and the arts. Bakhtin (1981) distinguishes dialogic from monologic discourse. Dialogic discourses contain the voice of the other within themselves. Kristeva (1986) renames this concept as the dialogical word. Dialogical words bridge the self with its other. The dialogical word acts as a bridge between Eurocentric and Afrocentric theory. DuBois (1903) spoke of the "double consciousness" of blacks in America, which created a seeking to satisfy two ideals. These ideals were an unfulfilled connection to an African heritage, and an unfulfilled realization of the

ideals of American democracy. It is this ideal that identifies the foundation of the phenomenon called hip hop rhetoric.

The two central features that have emerged in the area of Afrocentric discourse: rhythm and call-and response. Irele (1990) described rhythm as "the architecture of being...only rhythm gives (the word) its effective fullness." Asante (1987) sees rhythm as "the basis of African American transcendence." Transcendence is illustrated here not as an escape from but as a reconciliation of the dualities of existence-mind vs. body, sacred vs. profane, American vs. Africa (Asante, 1987). Rhythm is a guiding force for interactive discourse-through call-and-response, in which both structure and meaning are co-determined through interaction between speaker and audience (Smitherman, 1986; Levine, 1977; Chernoff, 1979; Callahan, 1988).

As ideal-types, Eurocentric discourse is speaker-oriented and indirectional; Afrocentric discourse is audience-oriented and interactive (Smitherman, 1986). Foucault (1972) noted that because European science has considered its texts as fixed, it looks back to

origins. By contrast, Afrocentric culture tends to see texts not as fixed, but emerging from interplay between speaker and audience, created through call-response.

A review of a Afrocentric communication theory must acknowledge that such theories were not traditionally codified in the written form. Rather these theories were embedded in narrative forms in the theories individuals created (Christian, 1987). This is a direct example of the oral tradition, a tradition who's roots are African.

One may draw the conclusion that hip hop rhetoric is the parallel between Eurocentric and Afrocentric theory of discourse. A cornerstone of both Afrocentric and Eurocentric theory is the idea of signifying. Gates (1988) sees signifying as a processual paradigm in which figures of signification denote "ways of meaning."

Eco's (1986) hyper-reality seems to bear a closer resemblance to the deconstructions of hip hop. Eco (1986) believes humans are entering a new communication era in which control is shifting from sender to receiver. Whoever "succeeds in making a given audience discuss the message it is receiving could reverse (its)

meaning," writes Ono (1986, p. 142) much like

[illegible]

[illegible]

Hip hop rhetoric is clearly speaker-audience oriented and requires a component of mutual understanding between participants.

Conclusion

Hip hop rhetoric is a cultural language used by a majority of African Americans, and some European Americans. This type of rhetoric has the ability to change meaning to eliminate negative messages, as well as coding language which can only be used by the group who understands its meaning. This style should be a concern to scholars in the field of communication since we study the process of information exchange. Hip hop has been around for years, but it has not had popular culture to catapult it into the mainstream.

The relevance of this style of rhetoric has overwhelmingly been positive. Monitarily, individuals are persuaded by their pocketbooks. Unfortunately, this should not be the reason why hip hop rhetoric is

[illegible] culturalize music, media, clothing, cuisine, hair styles, and literature. But what about the most important area that all individuals can benefit from? Education has missed the boat in the culturalizing of America. This "multi" culturalizing is indeed a fact one might see illustrated in the textbooks. But multiculturalism and issues concerning diversity lack substantially in the educational system. The differences in language styles need to be recognized as significant along with standard English especially since the color of our classrooms are steadily changing. When we teach our students the fundamentals of public speaking, do we view competence from a traditional Eurocentric perspective, or do we encourage our students to use those strategies that best articulates their own experience. Our field is not quite ready to see students in the basic speech course rapping their persuasive speeches.

Hip hop rhetoric is a system of speaking behavior. The language is alive and well and is spoken everywhere African Americans reside in America. For years African Americans have been admonished to hide their language, but popular culture has opened avenues for individuals to express themselves in a format which is undeniably unique and acceptable. As scholars, the field of communication has neglected to address some of the most profound statements made by popular culture. If hip hop is a form of language used by our youth as a means of self identification the next logical step for research is to identify reasons why coded language exists in the first place.

Hip hop rhetoric can and will bridge standard English and the Black vernacular together as a logical step towards multicultural understanding. Popular culture has the ability to transform what's not to what's hot.

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